Montana

**By Roger Stitson**  
July 18, 2001

**Of race and men**

Montana 1948 tackles family, race and memory.

'Forty years ago . . . A story that is now only mine to tell." These words, late into the prologue of Larry Watson's Montana 1948, indicate immediately the nature of this novel: the first-person, eye-witness narration powered by memory in which the private recording of relationships and the deeds of characters within a small community divulges, explores and "augments" the facts far beyond "what the historical documents might say".

However, there is always a danger in reading a first-hand account. Is it reliable, not merely in terms of the events, but in terms of viewpoint, opinion and expression? In the case of Montana 1948, is there any divergence, in these respects, between the attitudes of David Hayden the 52-year-old narrator, and those of David Hayden the 12-year-old eye-witness?

For example, what are we to make of David's portrait of his father, Wesley, the sheriff of Bentrock? Is the sheriff a weak, bullied, unheroic and morally crippled man (a state to complement his physical ailment, brought about by an accident years earlier) or is he an everyman crippled by terrible circumstances not of his own making, and searching for the right solutions?

Young David would prefer that his father were someone other than himself. In this respect, there is an ironic similarity to the preferences of David's mother, Gail, who wishes her husband would be truly himself, his own man, practising as a lawyer for which he's been trained, and living elsewhere, away from the negative aura of his father. The essential difference, though, between David and his mother is that whereas David is contrasting an impossibly romanticised view of what constitutes a sheriff - a gun-toting cowboy in a Stetson hat - to the staid if more realistic image his father presents, Gail is able to see into the truth of Wesley's position and standing in Bentrock.

Nowhere can this be more obvious and devastating than in the "flashback" sequence describing the homecoming of David's Uncle Frank (Wesley's brother, a doctor, a decorated war hero) after World War II, where one brother is publicly paraded by Grandfather Hayden, the other brother ignored. David observes his father at the back of the crowd, "picking up scraps of paper", and carrying them "a piece at a time, to the fire-blackened incinerator barrel".

The complex imagery here, which the younger David is unable to recognise, is of his father's suppressed pain, frustration, resignation and an unspoken acceptance of his lot. It is ironic, then, that while Wesley's physical state and demeanor hide an internal fortitude of not complaining or making a scene, behind Frank's wit, charm and "smiling ease with his life and everything in it", there lurks moral corruption. Frank's easy acceptance, in this sequence of the novel, of being called up to be his father's son, with no acknowledgement at all to his own brother, indicates the man he really is.

This is not to suggest that the sheriff of Bentrock is beyond criticism. We are told that, years earlier, Wesley gave up his "fledgling law practice and took the badge my grandfather offered. It would never have occurred to my father to refuse". Is this a sign of weakness, of being easily led, of lacking independence? Julian, David's grandfather, is a bull of a man no one has ever stood up to; his will has never been questioned or contradicted by anyone; his home, the family ranch, is an architectural expression and extension of this, a monstrosity of the plains rather than "the little house on the prairie". Beyond Wesley merely jumping to his father's tune, though, is the element of familial responsibility, "the weight of the family name" that Wesley must obey, or at least choose.

We are also informed by David that the sheriff, his father, is a racist: "He believed Indians, with only a few exceptions, were ignorant, lazy, superstitious and irresponsible". Initially, these easy assumptions cloud his judgement of Marie Little Soldier's refusal to be medically examined by Frank when she falls ill. Young David's innocuous comment to Marie - "It's just my uncle Frank. He's OK" - is likely to pass us by at first reading. It is only later that we realise not only how wrong he is, but sense the deeper horror implicit in those words, the same horror Marie must feel as she lies trapped on her sick bed in the house of the doctor's brother.

For herein lies the secret history of a community, the history of long-standing, silent abuse. "You know Frank's always been partial to red meat," David's grandfather crudely says later in the novel, accepting the plight of these Indian girls as though it were an element of the natural order. "Knowing when to look and when to look away" is Grandfather Hayden's advice about the role of a law enforcement officer in Montana. But when Marie's whispered truth emerges, the voice of conscience juxtaposed against these two expressions is that of David's mother (who, married into the dynastic clan, is not herself Montana-bred): "Sins - crimes - are not supposed to go unpunished."

When it seems there is a possibility Frank may escape justice, David says, "But we're the ones getting the shitty end of the stick", and it's at this point we are aware that he is growing up. In other circumstances his mother would have reprimanded him for foul language, but here she lets it go, for David has seen the true nature of the situation his father is in.

Probably the most surprising aspect of David's narration follows Frank's off-stage suicide in David's parents' cellar, an environment to complement his own moral darkness: "... I felt something for my uncle in death ... It was gratitude, yes, but it was something more. It was very close to love". Why love? Maybe it is not only his and the family's reputation that Frank has saved; he has also faced up to what he has done, and acted upon it with no thought of being saved by denials, legal trickery or Julian's interference.

"Don't blame Montana!" Wesley shouts at the end of the novel, years later, when David's wife suggests that these events were a product of the "Wild West", thus returning us full circle to David's boyhood fantasies about life in Montana. The question we may ask is, who or what, then, is to blame?

from [The Education Age](http://education.theage.com.au/cmspage.php?intid=136&intversion=13)